

What Are Soft Skills? Why Are They Important?

What is all the talk about soft skills? What's the difference between hard skills and soft skills? I don't need to worry about soft skills. No one gives me a grade on soft skills, only hard skills.

Soft skills can make or break your career. They may be some of the hardest skills you will ever acquire.

Hard skills are specific and teachable. They are those technical skills that are required for you personally or in a job. Examples are:

- Calculating to solve problems
- Keyboarding
- Operating machinery
- Driving a car
- Speaking a foreign language
- Reading directions for installing software
- Demonstrating competence for specific certification requirements

Soft skills are sometimes called people skills. They are personal attributes and habits that enhance an individual's job performance, career prospects and interactions with others. Examples are:

- Good manners
- Time management
- Willingness to accept suggestions or take directions
- Ability to ask for help
- Integrity
- Leadership
- Teamwork
- Adaptability

Employers understand the value of soft skills, but no one systematically teaches them. You probably don't learn these skills in school. You do need hard skills to pass a test or graduate from high school. The hard skills you have learned will get you an interview, but the soft skills will help you get and keep a job.

Here are some real-life situations. Using soft skills, write what the person in the situation should do.

1. I am supposed to be at work at 8:00 a.m. I am going to be 15 minutes late.

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2. I finished my work assignments for the day. My coworker is struggling to complete a mailing that needs to go out tonight.
3. I never seem to be able to finish what I need to do on time.
4. We are working on a group project. No one seems to know what to do.
5. I have agreed to submit a written progress report for my group but decide to just tell individuals what they need to know.

Look at the following statements. Put a check beside each that needs a soft skills component.

1. _____ It's OK to be rude to someone because the person is incompetent.
2. _____ If I have a point to make, I'll make it my mission to convince everyone that I'm right before I stop talking.
3. _____ Working with others requires listening and considering their opinions.
4. _____ If I ignore a problem, it will go away.
5. _____ Reading another person's body language will help me adjust how I relate to that individual.

For each of the following soft skills, ranked by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), assign a number from 1-5 that describes how well you feel you have developed that habit or ability. Use 5 to indicate that you have mastered the skill and 1 to indicate that you need to give the skill major attention. Assign the numbers between according to your progress with the skill.

- _____ Communication skills
- _____ Strong work ethic
- _____ Teamwork skills (works well with others)
- _____ Initiative
- _____ Analytical skills
- _____ Computer skills
- _____ Flexibility/adaptability
- _____ Interpersonal skills (relates well to others)
- _____ Problem-solving skills
- _____ Technical skills